

## PATRONIZATION OF VAISHNAVISM BY THE MEITEI RULERS OF MANIPUR: ORIGIN, ADVANCEMENT AND CONSEQUENCES

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### ABSTRACT

*Manipur valley came under the sway of the Meitei kings of Ningthouja dynasty from the 16th century in a very strong and formidable way. Some great Manipur kings like Garibaniwaza(1709-1748), Bhagyachandra(1759-1798) patronized Vaishnavism, the then very popular prevalent and pleasant religion as means to enlargement and strengthening of their kingdom. This paper would analyze how the whole of the Manipur valley, formerly just a place of tribes and clans established a powerful state in the late medieval period and got converted into a mighty kingdom. This study would also demonstrate how the Vaishnava theology created an opportunity and acted as a catalyst for cultural shift and expedited the expansion of the Meitei monarchy, which was never been documented, and how it paved the way for larger cultural absorption in not only Manipur but the entire north-eastern region of India. Various gazetteers, chronicles, and books of Manipur were used for the research of the paper, thus mentioned in the paper for authenticity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Meiteis, Vaishnavism, Manipur, Culture & Catalyst

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the medieval times, Manipur generated a series of excellent kings for the Meitei kingdom, including Kyamba (1508-1562), Mungyamba (1562-1697), and Khagembba (1597-1652). During the 18th century, there were also rulers like Charairongba(1697-1709), Garibaniwaza(1709-1748), and Bhagyachandra(1759-1798) who depicted a new era in Manipur's history. It is said that as the state of Manipur consists of both tangled forest covered hills and also open cultivated plain, its people also include both civilised Hindus and old tribes.<sup>1</sup> However Manipur has seen a transition as a consequence of Vaishnava spirituality. The region of Manipur was placed under the formal dominion of the Ningthouja dynasty from the fifteenth century. The militaristic aggravation and regional adventurism of the Meitei state was reflected in the nation's supremacy. The monarchs have utilised various reforms to encourage the authority of their kingdoms since the dawn of mankind. War, marriage relationships, and religious influence are seen to be the most important of these. During the 17th century, the Meitei kings placed great emphasis on this one flourishing and influential religion. This faith had a very liberal outlook, which helped the king to reconcile all of his subjects. When considering the impact of such a significant number of temples on society, it is important to note that the temples of Manipur altered the complete life structure of the region which will be discussed in the paper.

#### 1.1 Vaishnavism: Origin and Meaning

Vaishnavism, is one of India's oldest and most widespread religions. It dates all the way back to the Rig Vedic era. Lord Vishnu is the root of the term behind vaishnavism Even though roots of Vaishnavism are mysterious, we can deduce much about it from the earliest Bhagavata cults. Its policy of adoration aided in the propagation of the

Bhakti movement throughout India. Following the Gupta dynasty, several factions of this religion dispersed across India, progressively spreading their doctrine. However, after the fifteenth century, the bhakti movement grew consistently and dramatically, spreading even to northwestern India. Amongst the most crucial components of India's socio-cultural structure is spirituality and religion. From the mid-16th century, variety of social movements begin to implement under the impact of Vaishnavism. In Orissa, Chaitnaya Mahaprabhu (1483-1534 A.D.) popularised this religion among monarchs and commoners indiscriminately. Likewise, this religion impacted the kings and gave a new lease on life. Almost from the outset to the very rest of time, kings have utilised religion as a justification both for foundation and extension of their governments and realm. Similarly, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Meitei kings of Manipur used this religion for the legitimization of the kingdom. The devotion of Vishnu thus slowly got prevalent in Manipur during the medieval times.

Although there are a lot of investigations about great civilizations, monarchies, and their institutions and administrations, there are few insights on the establishment of regional kingdoms like Meiteis. However, imperial advancement and the history of larger kingdom formation cannot be completed without a thorough historical understanding of the history of lesser kingdoms. Historical works examining the contributions of the Meitei province and the impact of Vaishnavism on the creation of the Meitei kingdom are absolutely nonexistent. The historical beginnings, explanations of the temples, and other characteristics of this country have been highlighted in the relevant texts. However, the political reasons for the installation of temples and the kingdom formation process or the socio-cultural implications of their newly created religion on a bigger scale are not explained. As a result, an effort has been made to demonstrate the work in all those areas.

### 1.1.1 Advocacy of Vaishnavism by the Meitei Kings

It is stated that King Kyamba of Manipur obtained a stone statue of Lord Vishnu riding Garuda from Pong's king khekhomba. During this epoch, Vaishnavism began to expand throughout the valley. Now the question is, how did Vaishnavism captivate the ruling class to the point where it started receiving massive patronage from them for so many years?

Kyamba commanded his officers to locate any priest competent to venerate the idol. As an outcome, some brahmins were deemed to be eligible to worship the god. At Bishnupur, Kyamba erected a brick Vishnu Shrine.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the king's encouragement, vaishnavism was established. Because of the impact of vaishnavism, the Brahmins directly made King Charairongba as the first king of Manipur, being formally converted to vaishnavism in 1704 A.D by a Brahmin named Krishnacharya, who arrived from Sweta Ganga Puri and was escorted by his colleague Bala Bhadra Brahmachari. Charairongba also allowed construction of Kali temples.<sup>3</sup> This king took the sanskrit identity Pitambar Singh and built a number of Vaishnava temples as a reflection of his love to Vaishnavism. He gave his daughter in marriage to Ava king. He extended friendship and cordial Relations to the hill tribes.<sup>4</sup>

The Krishna shrine which he completed in Brahmapur, a brahmin neighbourhood in Imphal, is still in good shape. In 1717 A.D., the next king, Garibaniwaza, joined vaishnavism through guru Gopal Das. With the construction of a number of temples, the king emphasized the people's religious devotion. Lord Krishna and Kalika were the principal deities of most of the temples. Gharib Niwas with the support of the military and the common people attacked and defeated a Burmese force in 1725 at the mouth of the Maglang river.<sup>5</sup> Following the retirement of this Vaishnavi Guru, a fresh perceptor named Shanta Das mahaanta Bairagi from Sylhet, Bengal, arrived to the realm of the Meiteis to propagate Lord Ramchandra's doctrines.

### **1.1.1.1 Aggrandizement of Religion and Long Term Significance in the Society**

For 20 years, the ruler practised vaishnavism with utmost devotion and established it as the state sponsored religion of Manipur. The king was granted the title of Maharaja in 1724, and he was also referred as Manipureswar and Mekleswar. The queen too was entitled as Gomati Devi. The gotra for the 7 Clans of the Meiteis was provided by Shanta Das, as per the text Sanamahi Laikan. After conversion, the monarch and all meitei inhabitants were dubbed as kshatriyas. This Brahmins have associated the kings' lineage with Shri Ramchandra's Suryavamsha solar empire from the Ramayana. Bhagya Chandra during his remaining rule devoted all his energy in recasting the Manipuri society on a firm religious firmament and innovated various dance forms which later became world famous as Manipuri dance.<sup>6</sup>

The Vaishnava guru Shanta Das encouraged the people to contribute all of their offerings to the brahmins, and he prevented the people from consuming meat. In the capital area, pig slaughter and poultry rearing were restricted. The tombs of the past Kings, Queens, Princes, and Princesses were unsealed in 1725, and their Skeletons were re-cremated. The remains of their loved ones were poured into the Chindwin River. All of the residents' concerns were overridden by the king. As a result of the particular religious sway, burning of the dead was officially recognized from that year.

Further the outcome was the identification of Meitei celebrations as Hindu festivals, with Hindu terms such as Heigru Hitongba for the yearly boat race and Ayang yoiren iruppa for the annual bathing ceremony. Rath yatra got hold of the Ahong khongching festival, which was staged in June. Chanou Hui chintu was the theme of the govardhan puja (new harvest). But as a good consequence, the Hindu world of India was linked with Manipur socially and culturally. Thus the visitation to Hindu religious sites got frequent. The Meitei people also practiced the ritual of ear-boring which was called Nahutpa.<sup>7</sup> Under the supervision of Brahmin priests, once the family members of royal household went on a journey to the Ganges. It was not essential for people to change their religion. Shanta Das has even failed to persuade individuals in some instances initially. Whether it is Rama cult Vaishnavism or Chaitanya school of love of vaishnavism, these had found common ground with the previous faith of Meiteis. Shri Bhagya Chandra's most major achievement was the creation of Shri Govind temple which brought him closer to the masses. The Vishnu sculptures carved of the Jackfruit tree were categorized in four distinct locations.

This same Meitei people embraced dance, music as an act of worship. Raasleela was initiated for the entire community when the spirit of Vaishnavism was started. Ras is the core of Manipuri conventional dance, which combines indigenous Methi dance forms with a vaishnavite concept. Among the festivals of the Meiteis, the holi or yaosong is the greatest.<sup>8</sup> Both the sexes irrespective of age take part and the participants join hands in a circle singing the various songs which describe the creation and it continues till today.<sup>9</sup> With great initiative, Shri Guru Parmanand Thakur formally converted the then future king, Shri Bhagya Chandra, into Gaudiya vaishnavism. For the growth of Vaishnavism in the district, there were five representors. Ganga Narayan, Chakravartin, Krishna Charan, Kunj Bihari, Nidhi Ram Acharya, and Ram Gopal Bairagi were those who involved themselves in the mission.<sup>10</sup>

Ram Gopal Bairagi established Nangbam selungba as the first convert. Krishna Das Thakur, Adhikari Kamdev, and Shri Rup Parmanand Thakur succeeded him. In Manipur, there was also the emergence of Bengali cultural relevance. Bengali was spoken by the religious presenters. Thus, Bengali language and literature with the intervention of the Bengali school of vaishnavism was prevalent and is seen relevant even today. Sanskritization was not restricted to art and literature; it also included transformations in attire, food patterns, and the use of Bengali as a holy language in chants and texts. The theological and cultural ties with Bengal, particularly the places associated with Sri Chaitanya, have grown significantly.

The power of the Brahmins grew dramatically.

Thus the Vaishnava religion had a variety of influences that aided in the expansion of empire from a powerful kingdom with the assistance of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and all classes of the society. Because this humanitarian religion provided for the needs of the masses creating a strong legitimization. Due to the impact of this theology, Princess Bimbavati, Bhagya Chandra's daughter, became much influenced and spent her entire life to Shri Govind Ji's adoration and accompanied her father to Navdeep. Gaudiya vaishnavism came naturally to the general public. At the same time, there was religious syncretism and a fine synthesis. The Hindu Pantheon was associated with the local Meitei Gods and Goddesses. Soraren, the heavenly king, was associated with Indra, ningthou with Shiva, panthoibi with Durga, so on and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Manipuri vaishnavism was not merely a trademark imported from Bengal. It was configured to meet indigenous needs and objectives, demonstrating Hinduism's dynamism and resilience.

The advent of a new religion brought with it some regressive repercussions along with the hands of the Brahmins. The brahmins who came to Manipur made numerous attempt to introduce prohibitions of divorce, encouragement of pre puberty marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage etc.<sup>12</sup> They developed a unique caste as a consequence of their faith and religion. The brahmins of this country were provided lands by the kings and thus they lived by cultivation and sometimes trade and the kshatriyas were employed in military duties and other works in the palace.<sup>13</sup> All the other caste in the country lived by cultivation and had to work according to the lallup system like 10 days in a month for the Raja.<sup>14</sup>

Full eradication of the ancient Meitei faith did not come to fruition. The temples of 9 Umanglais were demolished,<sup>15</sup> as were the meitei puyas, or literatures, scriptures and manuscripts. Though J. Roy and R.K. Jhalajit Singh were sceptical about such an act.<sup>16</sup> Shanta Das's dissemination of Vaishnavism also brought the conservative methods in the Meitei society leading to the first Sati performed by a Manipuri woman. In Manipur, the earliest recorded occurrence of Sati burning occurred in 1726 A.D., at the death of Prince Murari. Sapam Khwairakpa ended up dead in 1733, and his wife died with him. Intercaste marriage however became ever more infrequent.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

Through favouring the Vaishnava religion, the Meitei monarchs were capable of maintaining their dominion for several years. As a consequence, Vaishnavism became a socio cultural hallmark for this new state. The backdrop and significance of Vaishnava religion in Manipur led to a greater cultural fusion in Bengal.. Following the kings, an architectural trend arose in Manipur's heartland, which lasted until the 18th century. Sanskrit language cultivation and growth also grew significantly. There was a significant impact on the acceptance of Bengali as a medium of exchange in lyrics and poems. All across the studies, attempt has been made to clear that the effect of Meitei religion and temples transformed the region's entire existence pattern. These had a new impact on the Meitei Kings' writings, dances, and entertainment and recreation, giving them new energy.

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